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ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that preschool children are more likely to use and explore print when their environment actively supports the use of print through real-life contexts. Children who have knowledge about print have been shown to have greater success with literacy development on entering school. This paper describes the Preschool Literacy Project (PLP) which has been established to examine the provision of literacy-based experiences in preschool programs in Victoria (Australia). The paper reports the project has been implemented in three stages over an 18-month period--the first stage has examined, in a survey, preschool teachers' views about literacy in the preschool; the second stage has been designed to provide professional development for teachers in those aspects of reading and writing development they had indicated they wished to learn about; and the third phase will measure the impact of the changes in practice in preschool on children's concepts about print on entry to school. The paper explains that the PLP involves 40 preschool centers within socio-economically depressed areas of metropolitan and country regions of Victoria. It further explains that responses from a questionnaire of preschool staff indicated an overwhelming uncertainty about the role of literacy in their programs and that, when reflecting on their current practice, teachers indicated that the major focus for literacy in their programs were a range of pre-reading and pre-writing activities. According to the paper, the project's findings illuminate how preschool teachers are limited in their expectations of young children and their development of literacy. (NKA)

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LITERACY IN THE PRESCHOOL

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The preschool years are now recognised as an important time during which children develop their understandings about the purpose and form of print. During these years children begin to see when print is used, how it is produced, what can be written and the types of messages that can be conveyed through print (Raban 1997). A number of researchers have shown that many young children are beginning to understand the nature and purposes of reading and writing well before they commence a formal program in literacy at school (Purcell-Gates 1996, Reynolds 1997). Many show an understanding that print conveys meaning and begin to make valid attempts at both reading and writing during their preschool years.

Evidence also suggests that preschool children are more likely to use and explore print when their environment actively supports the use of print through real life contexts (Purcell-Gates 1996, Vukelich 1994). Adults who engage with children in print related activities, that provide a purpose for its use, help them become aware of the role of print in their daily lives. Children who regularly share in a variety of print related experiences with more competent others are able to draw upon these experiences to build a conceptual framework about the nature and purposes of printed materials (Vukelich 1994). Purcell-Gates and Dahl (1991) have defined young children's emerging conceptual framework about the role of print in the real world context, as the *big picture*.

Children who have knowledge about print, in the form of the *big picture*, have been shown to have greater success with literacy development on entering school. These children understand that print gives meaningful information and that it can be used in a variety of transactions. They are therefore more able to make sense of the more formal literacy curriculum they experience at school. Children who commence school with this *big picture* demonstrate more independent exploration of print and more advanced thinking when presented with print related materials in the classroom setting (Purcell-Gates and Dhall 1991).

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The provision of literacy related experiences therefore has important educational and developmental ramifications for young children in preschool programs. Children who are supported in their efforts to explore the meaning of print and to use it as an integral part of their daily lives demonstrate a capacity to use legitimate reading and writing behaviours long before formal instruction is commenced (Neuman and Roskos 1997). Literacy represents more than a simple skill to be learned at school: literate ways of thinking involve children's cognitive awareness about the alphabetic form of print, the association of meaning to print and a social awareness about the ways in which print is used in transactions with others. In a print oriented society, such as ours, young children build their knowledge about print through personal experiences where print is used in normal daily activities. Home-based and preschool experiences with print therefore provide a foundation for success in the literate environment of school.

An important factor influencing the provision of literacy based experiences in the preschool program are the beliefs that preschool professionals have about how young children learn to read and write (Mills and Clyde 1991). Teacher's assumptions about how children become literate either limits or expands the opportunities offered for this development. These beliefs will directly influence the philosophy of the early childhood program and its educational focus. This, in turn, will influence the choices of resources that are made available to the children and the extent to which children are actively encouraged to share and explore print-related experiences. Thus literacy-based experiences will be limited or expanded in practice through the types of equipment and the ways in which teachers model and support children's efforts. Meaningful literate experiences can be incorporated into the preschool program without disturbing its child-centred focus. Print enriched play environments have been shown to encourage children to use literate behaviours with both peers and adults during free-play periods (Vukelich 1994).

The Preschool Literacy Project (PLP) has been established to examine the provision of literacy-based experiences in preschool programs in Victoria. The project has been implemented in three stages over a period of 18 months. The first stage has examined preschool teacher's views about literacy in the preschool. This stage of the project has been conducted using a survey and follow up interview. Pre-school professionals have been asked about a range of issues concerning literacy in the preschool. The issues raised in the survey include the development of reading and writing in young children, their concerns about the role of literacy in the preschool program, how they currently include literacy based experiences in their program, what they would like to know about young children and literacy and what they believed parents should do to encourage children in this area of development. A follow up interview provided them with an opportunity to elaborate on their responses and to discuss how factors related to the operation of their Centre affected their program.

The second phase of the PLP has been designed to provide professional development for teachers in those aspects of reading and writing development they indicated they wished to learn about and trial in their preschool programs. The third phase of the project will measure the impact of the changes in practice in the preschool on children's concepts about print on entry to school (Raban & Ure, in press).

The PLP involves 40 preschool Centres within socio-economically depressed areas of metropolitan and country regions of Victoria. This project has been developed in collaboration with the Early Literacy Research Project (ELRP) currently being conducted in 52 primary schools from socio-economically depressed regions of Victoria (Hill and Crevola 1997). The preschool centres in the PLP all act as feeder Centres to the schools in the ELRP. The link between these two projects provides an opportunity to study the development of young children's literacy achievements in the early stages of schooling and to monitor of the outcome of any changes in the focus on literacy on the preschool program. It also contrasts services for young children through 2 government agencies as preschools are administered through the Department of Health and Community Services and school are administered through the Department of Education.

A total of 232 preschool Centres had children attending an ELRP school. In many instances however, only one or two children were involved, so a decision was taken to approach 156 Centres with 5 or more children attending an ELRP school. The Management Committees and staff of each of these Centres were invited to participate in the PLP through a letter. Follow up phone calls were made to all Centres that did not respond to the initial invitation. Many Centres declined to be involved and many indicated that literacy was not a major focus in their program and that they preferred to focus on other areas of children's development. The responses of the teachers from the 40 Centres that became involved in the project were varied. Some indicated that they had limited experience and/or knowledge in this area of development and were therefore unsure about how they might become involved whilst others indicated they were excited to have the opportunity to learn more about a topic that had concerned them for some time.

Preschool staff from the 40 Centres were asked to complete a questionnaire and to indicate whether they were willing to participate in a follow up interview. All participants indicated their willingness to be interviewed and visits were made to each Centre to conduct the interview. An inventory of materials used to support young children's reading and writing was also recorded during these visits.

The responses from the preschool staff indicated an overwhelming uncertainty about the role of literacy in their programs. They indicated their initial training had provided only limited information on this aspect of development and felt that their knowledge about literacy and young children was limited. Opportunities for professional development in this area had also been extremely limited. They wanted to know more about how young children became readers and writers and were interested in research in this area of development. These teachers believed that methods for teaching

literacy at school had probably changed, since their own training, but they did not know what these changes were. They did not know what children would experience in their first year of school. They also felt unsure about their own role in this development were uncertain about how to advise parents. Many teachers were convinced that parent's expectations for their preschool aged children were too high and that parents often pushed their children into reading and writing too early and used inappropriate methods.

The many uncertainties these teachers had about young children and literacy caused them to express a number of paradoxical views. For instance, whilst these teachers were concerned that young children might be pushed into literacy too soon they were also concerned that their own expectations and program they offered might be too low for children. Similarly, whilst they expressed concern that parents push children to read and write too early, they also believed that those children who did show an interest in literature or were able to read and write at preschool, did so because there was support for this in the home environment.

When reflecting on their current practice teachers indicated that the major focus for literacy in their programs were a range pre-reading and pre-writing activities. For instance, the development of fine motor skills including eye control and left to right movement activities, as well as an appropriate pencil grip and handedness were identified as pre-writing skills. Perceptual skills related to the discrimination of shape and form and sequencing were identified as being important as for the development of pre-reading skills.

The most common expectations these teachers held for children's independent reading and writing was for them to able to recognise their own name and perhaps write it by the end of the kindergarten year. This development was supported through the provision of name cards for children to match, recognise and copy. These name card activities were usually introduced during the later part of the year, and were included to prepare children for school. Some teachers also used prepared worksheets, that required children to circle correct response to simple visual discrimination tasks, to further prepare children for formal classroom experiences at school. Only one teacher was found to foster literacy use through dramatic play experiences and another teacher had set up a special reading room where children were able to participate in an enriched exploration of books and stories. This room was full of books and a large number of supporting props and equipment including puppets, hats and other related objects.

In most instances the literacy experiences provided were based on a similar expectation for all children, regardless of the skills or interests they displayed at the commencement of the preschool year. For instance many teachers stated that some of children in their Centres had been able to read and write on entry to the preschool program. They noted examples where children read books, wrote their own name on their work and where they asked for assistance to spell a word or name. When questioned further about how they planned for these children these teachers indicated

that they would provide information, (in the form of spelling or reading a word), when a child asked for it. There were no examples where teachers developed curriculum goals specifically for those children, who were interested or able to read and write. Children needed to be able to ask for assistance or were left to demonstrate their own competence. For further development to occur children needed to be able to prompt their own developmental and educational need. For instance children would need to understand the concept of spelling, the nature of the alphabet etc in order to ask for assistance with associated tasks. Teachers were reluctant to actively model and promote children's attention to and use of print. A number of teachers indicated that some children who had commenced preschool with the ability to write their own name were less inclined to attempt this, or did it less well toward the end of the year.

On the other hand it was accepted that some children would not engage in print related activities in the preschool. These children were believed to be "not ready" for literacy. This implied a lack of developmental readiness and lead to an understanding that literate activities were beyond the capabilities of these children or of no interest to them. There was little attempt to engage these children in print related activities.

These teachers were however most interested in the development of literacy and they wanted to know more about how young children acquired these skills. They were uncertain about which methods were regarded as appropriate for teaching young children and they were inclined to believe it was best to leave it until the children went to school and were taught correctly. They were most concerned that they "could get it wrong" and thus cause children to have problems at school. These preschool teachers were also uncertain about how far they might go in further developing literacy in their programs. When asked what they would like to know more about they wanted to know whether or not limits should be placed on literacy in the preschool. They raised a number of questions including "How far should I go?", "What expectations should I have for children ?", "What should we be doing in the preschool?" and "Shouldn't we wait until they get to school?". Another very common view was that children would be bored at school if they had advanced reading and writing at the commencement of schooling.

These teachers also believed that teachers in primary school were critical of adults who attempted to teach preschool children to read and write and that when children commenced school teachers were often faced with the task of having to "undo" whatever had been (incorrectly) taught prior to school. There was a general acceptance that literacy should be "left until the children went to school". This view appeared to persist despite the fact that most of the teachers were able to identify preschool-aged children in their programs, who were beginning to master various aspects of reading and writing.

The interview with the teachers provided an opportunity to explore a range of systemic issues that influenced the quality of their programs and the experiences they were able to provide for literacy and its development. Concerns were raised about the

large numbers of children in their groups, the limited time that children had in their programs and the flexibility in service they were expected to provide for parents. For example a typical kindergarten would offer one to three groups, of up to thirty children, each attending for 10 hours a week. These 10 hours were offered in a variety of ways; the most common patterns were 4 sessions of 2 hours and 30 minutes or 3 sessions of 3 hours and 20 minutes although 2x 5-hour sessions were provided for parents requiring a long-day program. Some kindergarten programs were integrated within a child-care setting where the kindergarten teacher and child care staff worked with the same children. The large number of children and families catered for by many Centres often exacerbated the demands on the preschool staff. For instance, one Centre was found to be working with children from 90 families. This Centre and operated a kindergarten and child care program with minimal administrative support.. In many instances the families came from a large number of different ethnic backgrounds and this placed further demands on the early childhood staff. These demands often meant that there was little time and energy for curriculum initiatives. The short session times coupled with the large numbers of children also limited the amount of time available for individual interaction. The need to provide for multiple groups of children on the same day caused difficulties in organising rooms, displaying children's work and developing projects with children over a number of days.

The findings of this project illuminate how preschool teachers are limited in their expectations of young children and their development of literacy. Preschool teachers demonstrate a lack of awareness of recent research concerning literacy development and young children. They lack knowledge of concepts such as the *big picture* and the need for children learn to think in literate ways. Thus expectations for literacy development in preschool are rather limited in their focus. In most instances expectations for the development of reading and writing go no further than for children to recognise and write their own name. A commonly held belief that the teaching of reading and writing occurs through formal processes leads further to the view that reading and writing are subjects to be taught at school.

These beliefs about the teaching of literacy coupled with a belief about young children's (lack of) developmental readiness for learning to read and write also means that many children in these Centres are not being regularly engaged in literacy based experiences. The child-centred focus of these programs means that initiatives for literacy related experiences is largely determined by the child. Thus many young children will have restricted access to print related experiences because they are unable to understand its nature and purpose. This lack of exposure to print will limit the opportunities these children are able to draw upon to build a concept of the *big picture*. Thus, we can appreciate two opposite trends for young children and literacy in the preschool setting: one where an understanding of literacy grows as children seek out more enriching experiences and learn more; and, one where a lack of understanding results in a limited ability to take advantage of the opportunities that are available.

The data presented in this study suggests a need for a review of our policies and practices so that our goals for children's experience of literacy reflect current research evidence. In the field of literacy we need to appreciate the nature of the links between early exposure to print and children's growth in understanding about its nature and purpose. Thus early experience with print related materials and activities provides an essential foundation for schooling. Recognition of the importance of these links across the home-preschool-school interface will help establish the significance of the role of preschool programs within the community and lead to a clearer appreciation of their educational significance in the lives of young children.

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